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Fate, Glory, and Love in Early Modern Gallery Decoration: Visualizing Supreme Power. Margaretha Rossholm Lagerlöf.

Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013. xx + 276 pp. + 12 color pls. \$119.95.

A gallery was an elongated hall meant for recreational purposes and increasingly used for the display of works of art; originating in the sixteenth century, one of the earliest examples was the Galerie François I at Fontainebleau (1530–39). Although comparable to a colonnade, a porticus, or a loggia, it was unknown in antiquity. Consequently, indications for appropriate decorations cannot be found in classical sources such as Pliny or Vitruvius. Over the years, galleries would develop into rooms where the owner would show his art collection. Thus they would take over (part of) the function of a reception room or *sala grande*.

The decorations of four prominent galleries from the early sixteenth through the beginning of the eighteenth century are the subject of Margaretha Rossholm Lagerlöf's study. In four separate chapters she discusses the Galerie François I at Fontainebleau, the Galleria in Palazzo Farnese in Rome, the Galerie des Glaces at Versailles, and the gallery of Karl XI in Stockholm. In the introductory chapter, Lagerlöf explains that she has

chosen these examples as “varied, rich, and ‘telling’ examples of visually manifested expressions of sovereign positions in the early modern societies they represent” (17). Each chapter starts with a description of the decoration and a helpful survey of essential information, followed by an extensive interpretation. This leads to “impressions and observations” used “in an instrumental and trained way to construct the hypothetical comprehensions and reflections of relevant viewers living in the circumstances that motivated the decorations” (18). In practice this means that Lagerlöf discovers “webs of allusions,” of which it is not always clear, however, whether they contain meanings that were originally intended or if these meanings originate from the author’s personal notions. For instance, in her longest chapter, on the Galleria Farnese, Lagerlöf comes to a totally different reading of the fresco paintings than Clare Robertson does, whose extensive recent study, *The Invention of Annibale Carracci* (2008), is totally ignored. While Robertson makes it clear, on the basis of a thorough study of documents, preparatory drawings, and circumstances, that Carracci’s paintings have nothing to do with the wedding of Duke Ranuccio Farnese and Margherita Aldobrandini, Lagerlöf considers this event an important factor for a good understanding of the decorations. Her web of allusions even leads to such interpretations as follows: “The most fundamental anxiety thematized in the vault decoration seems to be the ‘sodomite’ temptation” (142). It is not easy to see how this would conform to Robertson’s well-argued conclusion that the appearance of the paintings sprung mainly from artistic considerations and the choice of subjects was based on a quite open program.

A web of allusions is also Lagerlöf’s clue for reading the decorations of the Galerie François I. Trying to unravel the intentions of the paintings and stuccos that Francis I commissioned from Rosso and Primaticcio is admittedly difficult, as some of the scenes cannot even be identified with certainty. Supposedly, not even the king’s own sister, Marguerite d’Angoulême, could figure them out. Yet the way Lagerlöf discusses them seems to reveal more about modern interpreters than about the (possible) meaning of the decorations: “The meaning structure is a web that is both thin and tight, with ‘knots’ equal to hints at openings for inquisitiveness and brooding, but possibly capturing the minds of visitors to stay in the stories, sheltering the main ‘self’ of the decoration (the king), left alone, in the unrendered solitude protected by the veil of images” (237).

Lagerlöf deserves praise for being the first to study gallery decorations as a separate genre developing through time, with a focus on “the establishment of traditions” (18). Moreover, she offers clear and concise information on decorations of which there exist only a few comprehensive studies in English, such as the galleries of Fontainebleau and Versailles, and decorations that are relatively unknown (the gallery of Karl XI in Stockholm). Her reading of the decorations, however, abounds with notions and terminology that one would look unsuccessfully for in source material, and I consequently wonder if this study does not say more about Lagerlöf’s own premises and interests than it does about the messages that the patrons and makers intended to communicate.

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